

High-Stakes Sandwich

Don't Build School-College Collaboration on More Tests

PETER SACKS

Higher education authorities are embracing the latest movement in education known as “P-16.” Its proponents argue that colleges have operated too long as a separate realm from America’s public schools. As a result, many high school graduates aren’t properly prepared for college, despite the unrelenting national push in public schools for rigorous standards and tougher tests. That standards gap, the P-16 proponents contend, is burdening colleges with too much remedial training and forcing ill-prepared students to drop out of college.

Proponents of the P-16 idea say it’s time for states to link their higher education, preschool and K-12 systems by aligning college admissions standards with high school graduation standards. And indeed, Massachusetts officials recently floated a proposal suggesting that the very same high-stakes exam students will soon have to pass to earn a high school diploma (the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exam, known as MCAS) do double-duty as a gatekeeper to college.

Dozens of states have embarked on collaborative P-16 initiatives. But policymakers fall into a dangerous trap if they insist that achieving the coveted “alignment” of standards between schools and colleges depends on expanding the use of high-stakes tests. They should consider the educational damage already being wrought by the accountability movement in American schools and how upping the stakes on high school graduation exams could actually harm both academic quality and fairness in higher education.

In what passes for education reform nowadays, state legislatures have created systems that require teachers and schools to employ whatever means necessary to boost standardized test scores as quickly as possible. The sticks and carrots—based on test scores—include bonus incentives for teachers in nearly a dozen states including Texas, California and Delaware; targeting “failing” schools for state seizure in 14 states including New York, Maryland and Michigan; and even firing principals and teachers in Alaska and North Carolina. Some teachers and administrators in such locales as Potomac, Md., New York City and Houston have resorted to cheating in order to win the test-score horse race.

Far more often, however, schools and teachers are encouraged to *teach to the tests*, recasting the entire classroom experience around the high-stakes exams. Subjects and modes of inquiry not on the test and not easily formatted as a test item, such as in-depth projects in science and history, are pushed out. Mind-numbing worksheets, drills, practice tests and similar

rote practices are the order of the day—day in and day out.

These effects are well documented in the scholarly literature. That policymakers have chosen to ignore such evidence about the damage to teaching and learning in public schools only serves to reinforce the conclusion that the accountability movement has been less education reform than political crusade. It has been driven by the seemingly unquenchable need of many politicians and conservative think tanks to make scapegoats of public schools.

The stakes for children are enormous. Some two dozen states require or soon will require students to pass a standardized test to earn a high school diploma—even, unbelievably, in cases when a student is earning As and Bs in school. In New England, happily, just one state, Massachusetts, has taken this leap. But several other states in the East, such as New York, New Jersey and Maryland have also jumped on the bandwagon, according to an *Education Week* survey.

One shudders to consider the pressure-cooker atmosphere that will consume schools in states that make those same tests a gatekeeper to higher education. Institutional urges to teach to such tests—and to abandon music, art and the in-depth study of history, science and humanities—will further degrade public schooling into a mean and nasty experience for many children.

As always, the evidence shows that it’s the poor and minority children whose school experiences are most often reduced to prepping for high-stakes tests. That policymakers would double high school “exit” tests as college-entrance exams is especially troubling, considering the widespread failure rates among poor and minority children already seen on such tests in many states.

Consider, the MCAS 10th grade exams in math and language, passage of which will be required for graduation in Massachusetts beginning with the class of 2003. Most of those who won’t graduate, according to a March 2000 report by the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, will be children in the

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poorest school districts—which account for a third of public school enrollments—such as Fall River, Boston and Brockton. In these areas, an estimated 65 percent of students would fail the MCAS and not graduate from school, regardless of their high school grades. That’s compared with failure rates of 12 percent in affluent communities like Andover and Wellesley.

And though the consequences of failing these graduation exams are high, there’s virtually no evidence that performance on such tests significantly predicts college grades or graduation rates. Consider P-16 efforts in New York City, in which the City University of New York (CUNY) system now requires students to pass standardized tests for entry to the four-year colleges. The Rand Corp. has estimated that the required placement tests predict just 6.2 percent of the variation in grades of first-year students at CUNY’s four-year schools and a scant 2.5 percent of the variation in grades at the two-year colleges. Those are pathetic indicators of college performance by any measure. In fact, policymakers who would use high school exit exams also as college-entrance tests should carefully study whether performance on these exams has any bearing on one’s actual ability to do college-level work.

Failing a state’s K-12 “exit” exam, of course, dooms a young person’s chances of attending college. I spoke to a young Hispanic woman in Texas who failed that state’s high school exit test seven times, always by as little as a point or two. She had been a good student, earning Bs in school, until her repeated failures on the graduation exam demoralized her and quashed her dreams of studying law enforcement in college.

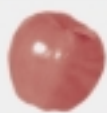
For the sake of both equity and intellectual rigor, higher education should resist these trends toward standardization. As the ultimate defenders of both fairness and academic integrity, university faculty themselves should counter the widespread and inaccurate belief that standardized tests can readily and almost flawlessly measure the academic quality of institutions and the merit of individuals.

Are there too many entering college students who need remedial help? Probably. Will the imposition of more standards and testing fix that problem? No. In fact, it will make the problem worse. College faculty will eventually have to confront one of the unintended effects of the high-stakes testing movement in schools: students who, though perhaps adequately trained in grammar and spelling, lack intellectual curiosity, creativity and initiative.

Our most promising students—regardless of their test scores—are those who have the simple desire to think and accept the world as a complex place in which knowledge cannot be spoon-fed to them in bite-sized chunks that neatly correspond to a multiple-choice test item. Those aren’t traits inculcated by a culture in which students are taught to equate accomplishment with the ability to passively learn only what’s necessary to perform well on standardized tests.

Yes, there is important work to be done to create stronger relationships between public schools and higher education. But doing so shouldn’t be about the alignment of academic standards between the two realms. It should be about engaging young people in the value of an intellectual life and a love of learning that will enable them to succeed both as students and as citizens. Our obsession with standards and measurement as the main ways to forge those links will prove counterproductive.

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Test Prep

The University of Massachusetts Lowell is among the Massachusetts campuses helping local students pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam, the controversial high-stakes test that Bay State students must pass in order to earn diplomas. This past spring, the university’s Graduate School of Education was awarded \$100,000 by the state Department of

Education to provide one-on-one professional development in math content and lesson planning for 60 teachers at schools that have performed poorly on the MCAS. The so-called Middle School Mathematics Institute will be expanded statewide next year. Also over 10 weeks in the spring, seven English majors at UMass Lowell spent about 100 hours each tutoring nearly 50 10th-graders from the Greater Lowell Technical School to help them pass the English section of the exam.